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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 000240

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SUBJECT: DISSENTERS' MARCHES VENT ANTI-PUTIN STEAM,
HIGHLIGHT FEAR OF PUBLIC DISSENT

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle for reasons 1.4(b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Opponents of the current political system staged rallies throughout Russia during the weekend of January 30-31. In Kaliningrad, thousands representing a wide range of political views gathered ostensibly to protest higher regional taxes, but also voiced their dissatisfaction with PM Putin. Smaller rallies also took place in St. Petersburg, Vladivostok and other cities. In Moscow, although city authorities denied permits to protesters, between 500 and 1000 people gathered at Triumfalnaya Square. They observed the prohibition on publicly displaying banners with political messages, but did chant anti-Putin slogans and resisted police measures to disperse them. While some force was used to remove more than 100 unwilling to vacate the square voluntarily, and some prominent leaders were detained, no special SWAT forces were used for crowd control and all detainees were released within 3 hours -- a modest "improvement" in tactics from last time. But the increasing personalization of the protests, singling out Putin, is likely to lead to a tougher approach in the future. End Summary.

Kaliningrad

¶2. (U) On January 30th the Solidarity Movement organized a rally which drew approximately 8000 demonstrators, including representatives from the Communist Party, Yabloko, Right Cause, Patriots of Russia and the LDPR -- every political party except for United Russia and Just Russia. Originally intended to generate grass-roots opposition to a proposed transportation tax hike, the regional administration withdrew a bill to raise the tax before the event took place. Solidarity organizers continued planning, however, and focused speeches on demands for broader political freedoms. Protesters openly shouted anti-Putin slogans, as motorists joined in protest by honking their horns and blocking traffic. Solidarity leader Boris Nemtsov highlighted disparities between the rights of Kaliningrad citizens and those of the European states which border the enclave. There were no reports of violence or use of force by police, though some protest leaders, including Nemtsov, were detained and then released. Nemtsov was able to travel back to Moscow in time to attend the Dissenter's march the following day.

¶3. (SBU) A Kaliningrad labor leader and head of the longshoremen trade union, as well as regional chairman of the Patriots of Russia party, told CG St. Petersburg the proposed increase in the transport tax in the region was intolerable, as it was already the highest in all of Russia. He also noted that it was not surprising the protests expanded to call for the resignation of PM Putin, as people were well aware that Governor Boos, with whom resident of the enclave were generally unhappy, was appointed by Putin, and the close ties between the two were easy to see. He went on to say

that that people in the city are beginning to understand that Putin's United Russia is attempting to lock people into a Soviet-style bureaucratic and one-party state, and that people opposed that and are becoming more vocal. His comments tying together Boos and Putin matched those by Nemtsov, who declared that Governor Boos is no better than Putin himself. Moscow Carnegie Center analyst Alexey Malashenko declared the situation in Kaliningrad proves that the real threat to the Kremlin comes not from distant political separatist movements, such as in the Northern Caucuses, but rather from economic separatism in various regions, such as the far East and now Kaliningrad, whose interests do not coincide with Moscow's.

Moscow - Protesters Detained, Observers Monitored

¶4. (C) Approximately 500 demonstrators, among them Moscow Helsinki Group Chairwoman Ludmilla Alekseyeva, Memorial human rights group leader Oleg Orlov and Nemtsov, joined by an equal number of observers (including emboff) gathered at Triumfalnaya Square (formerly Mayakovskaya) in the sub-freezing cold and darkness at 6 PM January 31 for a Dissenters' March to highlight Article 31 of the Russian Constitution, which guarantees citizens the right of peaceful assembly. Police officers lined the perimeter of the square, but in contrast to earlier protests special forces (OMON) were present only in small numbers and on pre-deployed police buses. Police buses were also parked bumper-to-bumper along edges of the square delineated on one side by the shopping district thoroughfare Tverskaya Street, and on another the

MOSCOW 00000240 002 OF 003

Tchaikovsky Concert Hall and adjacent metro stop. Onlookers could only watch demonstrators on the square from a distance of 20-30 meters from behind barriers guarded by police. Plain clothes "officers" moved slowly up and down the barrier line with video cameras, changing angles to be able to film all observers in the three to four person deep crowd. Suggestions from police officers barking into bullhorns that onlookers disperse were ignored, with some observers shouting back at police that they should be ashamed of themselves. MVD/FSB cameramen atop police buses closer to the demonstration recorded every moment and speech of the demonstration, as well.

¶5. (C) By the time police moved in to detain demonstrators who refused to vacate the square, Alekseyeva had departed. She told us February 1 that she decided to leave as demonstrators were being forced from the square. Nemtsov and Orlov were detained. As the first buses prepared to roll from the square, police opened barriers to let them out. Detainees inside two buses unfurled banners calling for "Russia without Putin," which aroused onlookers, including parents with children, students and the elderly, to shout support. In the course of the 90 minutes at the square, emboff chatted with a range of onlookers, most of whom expressed sympathy for the demonstrators. Whether identifying themselves as Communists, Solidarity supporters or apolitical, they uniformly disagreed with the "inhumane" way in which authorities responded to the gathering, and supported the demonstrators' right to publicly meet and deliver their views.

¶6. (C) We spoke with "For Human Rights" leader Lev Ponomarev at the demonstration and then again by phone February 1. He said that he was pleased with the fact that so many people participated or observed, and that Moscow authorities had heeded his group's call not to use OMON forces for crowd management. He noted that some persons in the process of being detained were roughed up, but overall he had praise for the way in which police handled the event. (Note: Solidarity Movement member Stanislav Kulikovsky told us he thought overall there were many more law enforcement personnel present than at previous Dissenters' Marches. End Note)

Human rights activist Yuriy Dzhibladze, who was detained, echoed the statements about police conduct. He told us February 1 that only those who resisted detention were roughed up, and he said he did not witness any beatings. He reported that most detainees were Solidarity activists, a smaller number were National Bolsheviks, and another group, including himself, were human rights professionals. Police at the station told him that they were uncomfortable with having to detain so many people, but that they had instructions from "higher levels" that they were to take into custody all who refused to leave the square. Both Dzhibladze and Ponomarev contrasted police behavior at the January 31 event with that at the January 19 public commemoration of the first anniversary of the murders of Stanislav Markelov and Anastasia Baburina, where police used tear gas and excessive force to disperse demonstrators.

Supporting Actions - 31 January

¶ 7. (U) Parallel Dissenters' Marches were held in St. Petersburg, Astrakhan, Irkutsk, Omsk, Murmansk and Vladivostok, though on a much smaller scale. The Vladivostok protest was authorized by local authorities and drew approximately 20 participants without incident. Approximately 100 people took part in an unauthorized Protest 31 in St. Petersburg on January 31. This was the first such Dissenters' March in St. Petersburg organized by Garry Kasparov's United Civil Front. About 30 protesters and observers were detained and charged with protesting without legal permission. Despite the arrests, organizers expect that the next protest will take place in St. Petersburg as scheduled on March 31.

Comment

¶ 8. (C) It appears that the outcry and negative publicity surrounding the violence and tear gas used against protesters in Moscow January 19 resulted in the relatively more restrained response January 31. But in contrast to Kaliningrad, where a huge and pointedly anti-Putin protest took place with little police interference, Moscow authorities still overplayed their hand. The personalization of public protest against Putin is still a relatively new

MOSCOW 00000240 003 OF 003

phenomenon, one unlikely to be tolerated or allowed to spread. End Comment.
Beyrle